From: Anne Speckhard
To: jmullins@bakersfieldpd.us
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A Caliphate Resident or Monster Made in Syria? Accused 'Beatle' Alexanda Kotey Speaks

Our new ICSVE research report of our interview with accused ISIS "Beatle" Alexanda Kotey, as published today in *Homeland Security Today*

by Anne Speckhard & Ardian Shajkovci

ROJAVA, Syria: "I didn't know John," 35-year-old Alexanda Kotey responds with a look of innocence filling his face to our question of, "Are you one of the Beatles?" It is a question blurted out in surprise when we find ourselves suddenly

unprepared to encounter Kotey as one of our interviewees in a detention facility in Rojava, Syria, where we are video interviewing imprisoned and suspected ISIS cadres held by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) for our *Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative* project. We are on our fourth day, filled with hours of listening to tough and sometimes tragic stories, and we have already completed four one-and-half-hour interviews today.

The SDF guards have only told us that the next ISIS prisoner to interview is from the UK. Kotey, however, is no run-of-the-mill imprisoned ISIS cadre and we are surprised to see him in our line-up. He is accused of being a member of an ISIS cell, known as "The Beatles," and remains a suspect for his association with guarding and the physical abuse of a number of UK and U.S. nationals as hostages, possibly involving murders.[i]

The ISIS "Beatles" Torture and Execution Cell

"The Beatles", an ISIS four-man cell, believed to have been led by UK citizen Mohammed Emwazi, also known as "Jihadi John," purportedly physically and mentally tortured international aid workers and journalists who they held hostage. Among these hostages were David Haines, Alan Henning, James Foley, Abdulrahman Peter Kassig and Steven Sotloff. [ii] They are believed to have also held American aid worker, Kayla Mueller, who ended up being severely abused by ISIS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi.[iii] These four young men received their nickname "The Beatles" from their hostages who mainly remember them by their voices and British accents.

The cell was infamous, even inside ISIS, for their cruel and harsh methods. There seemed to be no bounds to their sadistic methods, including crucifixion, waterboarding and tormenting their hostages with mock executions. Surviving hostages recall having guns pressed into their heads, swords held to their throats, being beaten and tortured with electricity, and having to watch the terrifying and gruesome videos of their friends being executed. These tormentors always kept their faces covered, likely following the practices of the ISIS *emni* (intelligence) that many of our now 144 ISIS cadres interviewees have described to us. The fact that they hid their faces makes it more difficult to gather evidence against them, as their

hostages would unlikely be able to identify them by facial recognition alone.

They have now been identified by intelligence sources as UK nationals. Their alleged cell leader, Mohammed Emwazi, was killed in a U.S. drone strike in 2016.[iv] A second Beatle, Aine Davis, also believed to have served in the cell, was arrested in Turkey and is currently serving a prison sentence in Turkey, convicted on terrorism charges. The other two men suspected of being part of the group, Alexanda Kotey and El Shafee Elsheikh, were captured by the SDF forces in January 2018[v] and are currently being detained in an undisclosed prison in Rojava, Syria.

Kotey was identified as a member of the cell by intelligence officials in February 2016.[vi] In January 2017, the U.S. Department of State, presumably relying on intelligence evidence, declared Kotey and Elsheikh as "specially designated global terrorists"[vii] for their roles in the Beatles. They are suspected to have tortured and beheaded more than 27 hostages. While serving as a prison guard, Elsheikh earned his reputation for waterboarding, mock executions and crucifixions. Kotey was designated as a terrorist by the U.S. State Department and was accused of being a member of the "Beatles" execution cell. According to the U.S. State Department, Kotey "likely engaged in the group's executions and exceptionally cruel torture methods, including electronic shock and waterboarding. Kotey has also acted as an ISIL recruiter and is responsible for recruiting several UK nationals to join the terrorist organization."[viii]

Kotey Reflecting on his Past

Kotey was brought to us from an isolation unit. He appeared eager to talk, though not about his alleged crimes or those he had allegedly witnessed being carried out by other ISIS members. Instead, he chose to turn the accusations around and debate international norms and legalities as they touch upon the actions of terrorist groups and those who attempt to fight them. Kotey, although currently not formally charged in any public documents with any crimes, is facing extradition to the U.S. over suspected involvement in the torture and killing of American hostages. Although historically opposed to capital

punishment and reluctant to extradite criminals and terrorists to the countries where the death penalty is enforced, the UK government is likely to make an exception in Kotey and Elsheikh's cases and cooperate with the United States. In 2019, the UK High Court noted, "Our longstanding opposition to the death penalty has not changed. Any evidence shared with the U.S. in this case must be for the express purpose of progressing a federal prosecution."[ix] The UK court also opined that it will not seek assurances that the pair will not face the death penalty in the event they are extradited to the United States. [x]

Like many ideologically dedicated terrorists we have interviewed, Kotey does not hide his anger. He is open to discuss what he sees as Western hypocrisies and what he feels were illegal and immoral military actions carried out by Western powers. Shedding light on how terrorists, like the accused Kotey, think is important to understand trajectories into terrorism and how individuals may begin to accept the terrorist mindset and global world view that then supports enacting brutal acts of terrorism. Provided allegations against Kotey hold ground, it seems that somewhere along his journey—either before or during his time in Syria—he was turned into a violent individual. Understanding how this process occurs is crucial to preventing and intervening in it. The authors interviewed Kotey for two hours in Rojava, Syria, in April 2019.

Given the sensitive nature of the charges surrounding Kotey's case and the brutal nature of his alleged crimes, we were surprised to find a soft-spoken individual who appeared eager to talk about himself as long as it did not touch on matters of which he is accused. Kotey's father is originally from Ghana but died when Kotey was only two. Kotey's father, a dress cutter, died of multiple injuries, and one of Kotey's relatives told Buzzfeed that he had committed suicide. [xi] The statement about his alleged suicide could not be independently verified nor was determined during the interview. The extent to which the manner and fact of his father's death may have affected him as a young boy remains unknown. Kotey's mother is a Greek Cypriot, but born in the UK, as was Kotey himself. As he spoke—also echoed with the first author's personal experience while living in Greece—the Greek side of Kotey's personality,

endowed through his mother's side, was very evident in his proud nature, enjoyment of debate, sense of humor and clear sense of intellectual superiority.

"I was an interesting student. I would think unconventionally. I would challenge a lot," Kotey recalled of his high school years. Yet, he was also a troublemaker. "I spent a lot of time in the corridor. I got into trouble. Smoking, drinking, chasing, girls. [I was] arrested a few times [but] I managed to avoid prison," he recalls. Kotey recalls growing up in a tough part of West London, an area also known for fomenting violent extremism. One of his acquaintances blamed the stark contrast between their tough part of London and the ultra-rich lifestyle of those living in neighboring parts of London as a factor in radicalizing him, although Kotey gave no evidence to support that assumption.

Converting to Islam and Turning to Humanitarian Actions on Behalf of the "Muslim World"

His intellectual curiosity and contact with "loads of non-practicing Moroccan Muslims" living in his part of London is what Kotey claims led him to a local mosque that included returnees from Guantanamo Bay. Leaving his Greek Orthodox history behind, Kotey converted to Islam and got involved in the challenges facing the "Muslim world." A longtime neighbor, however, credits his conversion, which she claims his mother was not happy about, to having fallen in love with a young Muslim woman and marrying her. The marriage didn't last, but his two daughters by it continue to visit his mother in London, according to this same longtime neighbor of the family.[xii]

In 2009, he went to Gaza on an aid convoy of 120 trucks and 500 people organized by a UK politician. The convoy of trucks, loaded with supplies for Gazans, departed from the UK only after some of the members were arrested as extremists and prevented from traveling, greatly politicizing the convoy right from its start. None of those arrested were prosecuted.

The group traveled through Tunisia, Morocco, Libya and into Egypt to enter Gaza through the Rafa checkpoint. Traveling with Kotey were some who might have contributed to his radicalization, like Reza Afsharzadegan, a London Boys leader

(a group associated with violent extremism) and a British-Iranian terror suspect, who was close to Emwazi, and two other extremists. Afsharzadegan, who had travelled to Somalia in 2006 and allegedly worked as UK-based recruiter for al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab, was in the same group of volunteers as Kotey. [xiii] Munir Farooqi, a convicted terror recruiter, and Amin Addala, a member of London Boys, also travelled with Kotey. [xiv]

A fellow convoy traveler had once stated that "the trip changed" Kotey.[xv] Whether Kotey radicalized further as a result of his travel-mates or due to the nature of the work remains unknown, although the trip clearly left an impression on him. On that note, Kotey states:

"We came right after (operation Cast Lead). They [the Israelis] bombed the university and used white phosphorus. I was more taken back by the Arab world, the suppression of the people: Tunisian, bin Ali; Morocco, Mubarak [he perhaps meant Egypt], Libya, Qadhafi dictating the way you live or your thoughts. I was surprised. It was different, to see with your own eyes. It was a sad thing to see. A lot of people came on the streets and welcomed us, donating aid, anything they had [for Gaza]. One of the towns we passed through in Tunisia the people told us, 'We were kept in our houses for three days on house curfew.' [This was] so they don' t see us. They told us, 'We will pay for it [i.e. coming out to greet the convoy].'"

Kotey stayed in Gaza for six days. "Coming into Gaza was emotional. I wanted to stay in Gaza but it was not allowed for convoy members to stay. Everyone who went in the convoy had to go out," he explains. This "humanitarian" character of Kotey at this juncture does not seem to match the description of him as one of the most brutal tormentors the surviving hostages describe. However, as we have learned in previous interviews with many ISIS cadres, it is not uncommon for terrorists to try to show their best selves. Likewise, many individuals initially traveled to Syria with humanitarian aims in mind, but once they fell in, or voluntarily aligned themselves with ISIS, some of them became monsters. Arguably, it is often community organizers and the better educated who care enough for socio-political change and some become frustrated enough to begin to believe acts of terrorism may be the only or best way to

addressing real and pressing grievances facing their communities. Thus, brutality and being an agent of positive change are not always mutually exclusive. In this case, we are reserving judgment. We are just listening and leaving ourselves open to see what we can learn of what happened with Kotey.

Those who were subject to the Beatles as their guards in prison cannot forget their brutality. In 2018, a Spanish hostage, Ricardo Vilanova, who was freed from captivity in 2014 after eight months of being held by ISIS, made the trip back into Syria with the Guardian's Quentin Sommerville to confront Kotey and Elsheikh. Villanova believes that his tormentors were members of the Beatles cell. Kotey and Elsheikh, however, refused to answer his questions and stopped the interview once he entered the room. It is unclear whether Kotey and Elsheikh felt intimidated with the confrontational nature of the interview, [xvi] or if they kept silence because they were aware that by speaking Vilanova might be able to recognize his captors who always kept their faces covered.

Vice reporter, Isobel Yeung, [xvii]who interviewed Kotey and Elsheikh in July of 2018, recounts that neither would make eye contact with her or her female producer also sitting in the room, preferring to direct their answers to her questions to their male cameraman. While the female part of our team voiced most of our questions, we experienced nothing of the sort. Kotey was engaged, made full eye contact and was clearly enjoying the conversation.

Journey into Syria

During the interview, Kotey presented himself as a caring, educated Muslim who repeatedly put his life on hold to go and help other beleaguered Muslims. Referring to his travel into Syria, he referenced aid convoys once again organized in the UK, but said that he came into Syria, "like everybody else, via Turkey, through Babel al-Hawa border crossing, an FSA governed checkpoint into Idlib. I came by myself [2012]," he recounted, adding, "I had a number for a Syrian Turkman who could get you from refugee camps [in Turkey] into Syria. I obtained [his phone number] from two friends of mine."

Kotey takes pride in his humanist stance and reflects on his

then urges to contribute in a humanitarian manner to the victims of the Syrian conflict. "I just came to be in Syria, on the ground to see what was needed, and what way to contribute and feel close to the people. You have to know if you want to help people," he explains. Kotey exhibits a strong identification and sympathy with Muslim victims, which he would have witnessed firsthand in Gaza and Syria, which aligns with the victim narrative of beleaguered Muslims propagated by both ISIS and al-Qaeda. However, speaking about this point in his journey into ISIS, Kotey is portraying himself as motivated by humanitarian concerns rather than by anger or wanting to join a jihad on behalf of victimized Muslims.

Kotey already had a good reading and listening comprehension in Arabic prior to his arrival in Syria, but he could not yet speak Arabic. "Aleppo was a bit chaotic at the time," he recalls, adding, "The city was recently liberated—no electricity, a lot of theft, a lot of groups and battalions, each one with its own checkpoint. Something out of Mad Max. [But,] the country side was okay."

When asked if he told his mother about his whereabouts, Kotey states he called her after entering Syria. Concerned, Kotey recalls that she asked him, "'Are you going to come back?' [She was upset] when I told her I was going to get married, or to look for a wife," he recalls. Kotey admitted to VICE news reporter Isobel Yeung that he had not talked to his mother since 2014, and asked with tears in his eyes about how she was.[xviii] The reason for not talking with his mother, we learn later in the interview, was due to Kotey's fear of being geo-located from his mobile phone signal and drone targeted.

Journey into ISIS

When it comes to his time inside ISIS, Kotey is unwilling to share much. He admits, "I ended up in ISIS territory." The journey into ISIS, according to him, was not due to a desire to join, but a result of being pushed eastward by the fighting. "I got married in early 2013, in January. I married a woman from a Syrian village from [near] Aleppo. I lived in the Aleppo countryside. [When the] bombing started, I moved toward Idlib, then back, then back to Aleppo," he states.

When asked his opinion of the rise of groups that began fighting each other in Syria, Kotey states, "The infighting [started in] 2014. Everyone knew it was going to set the gains of the opposition against the regime back. It would only benefit the regime."

"At that time, anything foreign was a target," he explained. "Some [Syrians] just weren't happy with the presence of foreigners [and a] big media campaign was going on. There was a demonization campaign going on against the foreigners. A build up, a subtle tone that kept being planted, statements of people," Kotey explains. He leaves out the fact that, during this time period, the jihadists had organized with groups like al Nusra, with ISIS and the others vying for power and turning their fighting against each other, losing sight of the initial aims of the Syrian revolution: to be free of Assad's dictatorial rule. Arguably, Syrians interested in freeing themselves of the difficult yoke of Bashar Assad were getting fed up. They had not planned their revolution to turn into a war, much less a jihad, attracting tens of thousands of foreigners streaming in across the borders to follow their leaders' orders without even understanding who, or why, they were killing other Syrians.

"So, we moved to the safest place at the time, [we] went to al Bab, then to Raqqa," Kotey explains. He is not the first ISIS prisoner who has told us this story of migration into the Islamic State to seek safety. While the veracity of such claims remain debatable, some foreign fighters who initially came for humanitarian reasons allegedly fell into this bind of not really understanding where they were, or how to survive. Unaware of potential repercussions, they believed their best refuge as a foreigner was in territory held by the Islamic State in which they migrated. Others got trapped, and even migrated all the way into Raqqa, Syria, or Iraq, and most got co-opted into fighting for and serving the group. It is difficult to discern whether any of the aforementioned applied to Kotey, as he chose not to say much, only explaining, "I was just seen as a civilian."

His cosmopolitan side emerges as he comments like a city boy looking down on what he refers to as the backwards Raqqa, stating, "I didn't really like it. I was accustomed to Aleppo and Idlib where the people were more hospitable. They were more

Arab in Raqqa, like Iraq, simpletons in a stubborn way."

Kotey has two daughters born to his Syrian wife. "I had my first daughter when I was in the Halep [Aleppo] countryside. [My] second daughter was born in 2015, in Raqqa," he explains. When asked how he could live in Raqqa without serving the Islamic State, namely, given the ISIS penchant for forcing young men into military service, he answers, "I'm from London, and I know how to buy and sell. I would trade in vehicles, from Syria. There was a market for vehicles in the north of the city, auctions. I had someone fixing them up, body work." Laughingly, he adds, "You become a mechanic in Syria. You have to oversee everything he does. I didn't know anything about vehicles before. I had done some trading before in the UK of vehicles, of a popular buy, and I'd make 500 [British] lbs. on one sale."

While it might be true that Kotey was trading in vehicles, that does not preclude him from also having served the Islamic State. Many ISIS cadres told us they had side businesses to supplement their ISIS incomes.

Kotey, however, insists that he lived among the Syrian civilians and was not in ISIS. "I made friends" Kotey explains, adding, "I preferred mixing with locals, especially after my experience in Aleppo and Idlib. I better get to know the locals if I'm going to survive another wave like we've been through." He says he became fluent in Arabic as a result of "hours with shops and fix-it places, [that] helped me with my language, and [my] marriage."
When asked to describe his experiences of Raqqa under siege, he recalls, "In 2015, they were bombing. From the first day it was light Syrian planes." He also recalls Syrian "sleeper cells left behind by factions that were in Raqqa, they would [mount IED attacks.] I was driving around Na'im Roundabout, and an IED went off on the other side of the road. I was fortunate I didn't get any shrapnel in my car or my body," Kotey recalls of the central Raqqa traffic circle. Kotey's mood changes as he recalls the event. He becomes visibly angered.

When asked if he saw executions and corpses on this circle, he answers flatly, "Yes. It was not the first time I saw a dead body." Kotey told a journalist in 2018 that he had eaten an ice

cream near a decapitated body and that it had not bothered him, adding that his emotional numbness to such things had not turned him into a monster. In our experience, many ISIS cadres living in Raqqa similarly became numb to the ISIS displays of dead bodies.

The Necessity of Using Brute Force

Kotey then turns our discussion into an attempt to debate President Trump's policies of involvement in the Middle East. Kotey holds views similar to terrorist ideologue, Abu Qatada—whom ICSVE researchers interviewed numerous times in Jordan. [xix] ISIS and al Nusra vehemently disagreed over whether it was the right time to declare a Caliphate. However, both advocated a non-interventionist West, an environment that would allow Muslims to overthrow dictatorial regimes in the Middle East and unimpeded get on with establishing governance according to their view of Islamic laws.

Kotey, like Abu Qatada, appears well read, and references to us Michael Scheuer, author of *Imperial Hubris,* saying, "He was against endless wars. If you want to remain in the Middle East and want to be a defender of Israel, you can let the Jews kill the Muslims and the Muslims kill the Jews. That the Palestinians kill the Israelis, and the Israelis kill the Palestinians. That the Shiites kill the Sunnis, and the Sunnis kill the Shiites. What he means by that is that it doesn't concern us, Americans should not have to die because of that." Then he continues to cite, "If you are going to be involved, you have to use brute force to a level that you don't care about international norms, amnesty, [and use] white phosphorus, carpet bombing and if you are not prepared to and not able to do that, you shouldn't be there." It remains unclear if this is also his view—that brute force is worth it—to get to the objective you want.

Reflections on ISIS Executions

Bringing the conversations back to how he felt about executions, Kotey answers, "In terms of application of Islamic laws, the *hadood*, as a Muslim, I don't have an objection to it." Yet, he doesn't care for how ISIS carried out their executions, explaining, "As far as how it's applied and the method to get to that point, and the necessity of displaying it publicly in that

way, no, I don't agree." However, Kotey continues with pointing out the hypocrisies in criticizing only ISIS when the Saudis carry out similar type executions, etc. He states, "the Saudis' application of some proponents of the shariah is brushed under the carpet. [They have a] seat in the UN, [and are a] member of the coalition, etc." To a journalist, Kotey pointed out that while ISIS is condemned for using beheadings in its application of shariah law for executions the Saudis practice the same and the Saudi king is invited as a guest of the British queen.

ISIS as a Totalitarian State

When asked if ISIS was a totalitarian state, Kotey states, "Exactly!" "The identity was Islamic, but the structure was of a socialist government that controls all aspects of life," Kotey adds, and notes that his mother's second husband is a socialist influenced by Darwin and Stalin.

Avoiding Serving the State

When prodded about how he managed to evade being forced to fight for ISIS, given that so many other young men who went to live inside ISIS territory have told us that it was impossible to escape fighting for the group without threat of death, imprisonment, torture and other punishments, Kotey explains: "That regime applied to those who came in when there was a structure." He further adds, "the Islamic state method of conscription is like the American method. If you are conscribed to the army, then you can be drafted at any moment. If you didn't conscribe from the very beginning…"

Kotey notes that not everyone living in Syria, who went to live under ISIS, did so out of ideological conviction. Referencing the extortion that was happening under the various warring groups in Syria he states, "The motivating factor for a lot of the businessmen who worked under the [other] factions and who moved from Halep [Aleppo, to ISIS territory] was that under ISIS, their wealth was protected and they could conduct their business without extortion. In Halep [territory], here, were 10 checkpoints and every checkpoint takes [its cut]."

In line with what we have also heard from other interviewed ISIS cadres, Kotey also references that ISIS was not loath to

trade with its enemies. "There was trade between Islamic State and the [Syrian] Regimes and YPG [Syrian Defense Forces]," he explains.

Kotey claims he did not necessarily desire to live in Raqqa and serve ISIS but all the same states that, "[I] felt like I was living in place that was trying to model itself on something Islamic. My motivation for being there was not for a desire for Raqqa, or wanting to stay in Islamic State territory. There was no other hospitable place," he claims, and further explains, "Leaving Islamic State territory? People who left were generally arrested."

In this regard, his account of foreign fighters who ended up seeking safety from groups that had turned against Westerners and were killing them by migrating eastward into Islamic State territory corroborates what others have told us. And once inside ISIS territory, it was very hard to exit. While it could be true in his case, it's unlikely as Kotey is alleged to be a top leader of a famous execution cell inside ISIS that reported to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi and was with ISIS from its beginnings.

Asked if he knew Westerners and foreign fighters inside ISIS, Kotey claims, "I didn't make friends with foreigners." Asked if he came into contact with Americans, he laughs, recalling, "I came in to contact one night on Ramadan – he was spraying painting a wall with graffiti. He was a white American."

Becoming a Monster?

At this point we confront him on the fact that he is considered to be one of the four "Beatles" serving alongside the heinous killer, "Jihadi John" i.e. Mohammed Emwazi. Kotey concedes, "If I was a Beatle, there was four. [So,] there were three [others,] Ian Davis; Mohammed Emwazi, I know from the UK, and Shafee Elsheikh, I knew from before." Kotey admits, "I knew Emwazi from London, [so,] I knew him in Syria as well." Yet, he denies that he was aware that Emwazi had become a monster inside ISIS. "I didn't see a change in him." Kotey, of course, also does not admit to having himself transformed into a monster while inside ISIS.

Targeted Assassinations

When it comes to Mohammed Emwazi, Kotey is also angry over the 2015 airstrike in Raqqa that targeted him as he left a building and entered a vehicle. Kotey tells us that he avoided using his mobile phone while in ISIS, apparently out of fear of ending up like Emwazi. "I was informed that I was on a kill list from the Americans," he says without explaining more. Thus, he never called his mother after 2014.

Kotey was eager to question the legitimacy of targeted killings, namely of UK and U.S. nationals who were members of terrorist organizations. He characterized the targeted killings of U.S.-Yemeni radical cleric and Emwazi ("Jihadi John") as extrajudicial executions that deprived them of their constitutional rights to due process and a free trial:

"Do you think someone should be killed when he wasn't even arrested? Or tried for a crime? You say yes, but what does the international law say? I remember the death of Anwar al-Awlaki. His son raised a big issue about this. Whether a U.S. citizen is allowed to be killed without basically due process? The targeting would have made sense if they had proven that it was him [Emwazi]. They killed him even before they proved it was him [Emwazi]."

Indeed, to date, the UK has carried out targeted killings against at least two of its citizens in Syria, justifying these drone killings of British citizens in Syria on the legal basis of self-defense to prevent potential terrorist activities in the UK planned by the Islamic State.

Moreover, Anwar al-Awlaki's extra-judicial killing at the time raised questions as to whether Americans could be subjected to extra-judicial targeted assassinations. Awlaki's 16-year-old American son, Abdulrahman al Awlaki, [xx]was killed a month later in Yemen, by a drone airstrike ordered by the United States. The American teen was struck while eating dinner at an outdoor restaurant in Yemen. Speaking on condition of anonymity, a U.S. government official later stated that he was simply a bystander while targeting a senior al Qaeda operative in the Arabian Peninsula.

Legally speaking, the targeting of U.S. citizens without trial has been justified under certain circumstances. For instance, the

2010 U.S. memo referencing U.S.-Yemeni radical cleric Anwar al- Awlaki's extrajudicial killing stated that he could be targeted as "he posed continued and imminent threat and was part of a group against whom Congress had authorized military force."[xxi] Likewise, under the current interpretation of U.S. laws, the claim of citizenship alone is not sufficient to provide immunity to terrorists from a use of force against them whilst abroad. [xxii]

Suicide Terrorism, ISIS Attacks in Europe and "Collateral Damage" in Military Airstrikes

When asked his opinion of ISIS' attacks in Europe, Kotey answers, "Religiously, it was not correct. It is not permissible to kill yourself, and killing innocents is not permissible in the shariah," he definitively states. His statement, however, seems to directly contradict the accounts of those who knew him when he was attending the Al-Manaar mosque back in London, prior to his travel to Syria. According to one acquaintance, Kotey would justify suicide terrorism and argue for it.[xxiii]

"In terms of my morality, I would say no for me," Kotey states, speaking about the ISIS terrorist attacks in Europe. Yet, he also is willing to defend ISIS from their point of view:

"From a logical rational perspective, if you want to speak about a justification, [the one] that they used is [asking] if there is a difference between [their terrorist actions in the EU and] an American pilot bombing a local residential place, a five-story building, bringing it to the ground. [You must be able to] distinguish that action that took that weapon. [It's about how much] collateral damage, the price you are willing to pay, to take a target."

"I've pulled kids from under the rubble, a mother with a baby in her arms," Kotey states. "The child was British and mother Canadian," he points out, both citizens of the countries of the coalition that bombed them. "If you cannot criminalize that, then you can't criminalize by your standards," he adds.

Kotey's argument is a familiar one. Many terrorists have confronted us over the years in regard to collateral damage, accusing Americans as the worst terrorists in the world. While the impact of the U.S. government policy on targeted killings

remains controversial, namely its impact on civilians, the U.S. actions do not constitute a direct and deliberate targeting of civilians and if they did it would technically be considered war crimes versus terrorism. In contrast, ISIS is known to intentionally target civilians in attempts to create terror, grief, and horror spread well beyond the victims they kill and injure.

"Americans can never be the bad guy," Kotey complains. "It's justifiable because it's in the name of good, but we can say that about anyone."

Coopting Islam

We push ahead, asking how he feels about how groups like ISIS contort Islamic scriptures to try to justify their terrorist actions aimed directly at innocent.

"There are different schools of thoughts regarding exacting revenge for an atrocity," Kotey explains. He then turns to the ISIS and al Qaeda frequent extortion from Islamic scriptures. "When they say, 'Kill in the way the way they kill you.' He [ISIS] takes only a verse out of [context in] the scriptures," he adds.

Likewise, Kotey concedes that even following certain *hadiths* or *fatwas* can lead to wrong Islamic conclusions, yet, groups like ISIS do just that to support their use of violence against innocents. "If he [an ISIS recruiter] considers what is evidence [for Islamic scriptures], a statement of a scholar is not evidence," Kotey explains, supporting what most Islamic scholars would also say—that only the actual verses of the Quran and trusted hadiths are evidence of the existence of Allah and his wishes bestowed upon his followers. "Fatwas are specific to time and place," Kotey continues. "And he [the scholar] may have been wrong," he adds. For true believers, as ISIS claims to be, only the Quran and Sunnah (trusted writings about the statements and actions of the Prophet Mohammed and his companions) are to be the ultimate and trusted sources of Islamic guidance. Yet, ISIS is more than willing to twist them and take them out of context. Kotey agrees on that. Yet, he also defends them, saying, "The fact that maybe they [ISIS], contradicted Islamic texts, it wouldn't nullify what they claimed to uphold."

Moving to other contradictions, Kotey asks us if the 2009

shooting at the Fort Hood U.S. military base by Nidal Malik Hasan would be considered a justified and legitimate attack, and why the U.S. government did not label it as an act of terrorism. "Nidal Hasan, he did not target civilians. He attacked a Texas [military] base," he also states, implying that the base was a legitimate target. While his question serves to stress the U.S. government's hypocrisy in dealing with domestic forms of terrorism, the cases of individuals who have committed acts of violence in their respective countries, and in the name of Islam, seems to remain relevant to Kotey.

Attempts to Understand One's Enemies

Paraphrasing from Michael Scheuer, Kotey notes, "I don't believe in demonizing the enemy. Historically, it was not a problem mentioning a good quality of our enemy, now we defame and demean. Michael Scheuer said this does nothing to help us to understand our enemy, [it] doesn't allow us to understand him." Using the same logic, Kotey may be the monster he is accused of, but it's still good to try to understand how he thinks and why he would have turned so bad.

The account we piece together in this article from our 2-hour interview, coupled with external sources, sheds light into the psychology of terrorist actors—particularly once caught—their thoughts and feelings about Western interventions in the so-called "Muslim world," the legality and moral appropriateness of drone and other aerial attacks, the perceived hypocrisy among terrorists to distinguish between terrorist intentional targeting of civilians vs. military terrorist targeting —a distinction he refused to acknowledge—the legality of foreign fighter detentions, and how the threats to physical safety of the group (ISIS in this case) are often perceived by the warring parties in a conflict.

During our interview in Jordan,[xxiv] Abu Qatada wished for the West to cease its involvement in the Middle East and North Africa, in Muslim-dominated lands, stating that dictatorial regimes needed to, and would ultimately, collapse without the support of Western military interventions. He further stated that it was finally time for an Islamic State to rise up in their place. In a similar light, Kotey also challenged the legality of military interventions against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. The

execution video featuring one of the Beatles—journalist James Foley—contained demands to the United States to cease its airstrikes against the group. Kotey is still making those same demands.

The question of under what conditions states may use force against non-state armed groups, such as ISIS in Iraq and Syria, remains uncertain and contentious indeed. The accurate interpretation of the international law by experts in this regard also seems to be lacking.[xxv] However, the past and ongoing operations against non-state armed groups in Iraq and Syria, including against ISIS, by states suggests endorsement of *defensive* actions against non-state armed groups in states that either *directly* harbor or support non-state armed groups or *lack* capacity or control over areas where such non-state armed groups operate.[xxvi]

Denouncing ISIS yet Refusing to Make a Counter-Narrative Video Clip

We ask Kotey to join our project and speak out publicly against ISIS on video, to denounce what he openly states and believes was wrong in the Islamic State: that they functioned as a totalitarian state, that they punished, and even executed, those who attempted to leave, that they traded with their enemies, and that they carried out terrorist attacks aimed solely at innocent civilians. Kotey has already labeled ISIS a totalitarian state and makes clear that they had dealings with their enemies. He also is willing to condemn them for their attacks outside ISIS territory. All of this has been captured on video and could be used in a counter narrative video to protect others from joining the group. We ask him, if he is really the Muslim believer he claims to be, is it not his obligation as a Muslim to denounce what he believes is wrong with ISIS, having witnessed these things first hand? Smiling wryly, he agrees, "It is my Muslim duty."

Yet, he declines to do so, and forbids us from publishing his video, assuring us that when he gets out of prison he will do so. Yet, aware of his potential extradition to the United States, and even potential transfer to Guantanamo Bay for his alleged involvement with the Beatles, Kotey seems to acknowledge that he is unlikely to walk free anytime soon. He complains, "I am

apparently stripped of my citizenship."

Asked if he is angry about that, he wryly answers, "I'm beyond pissed."

Issues of Stripping Citizenship and Extradition

The UK government stripped Kotey of his UK citizenship, along with 150 other UK citizens with dual nationalities who were suspected of having joined ISIS, using the legal basis of acting in the "public good" in an aim to prevent these militants from returning to Britain. [xxvii] In finding out about the decision to strip him off his UK citizenship, Kotey has stated to the media, "I found it strange that they could actually do that, revoke the citizenship of a person," Kotey said. "I was born in the UK," he said. "My mother was born in the UK. I have a daughter there in the UK. ... I probably never left the UK more than 3 months" before coming to Syria."[xxviii] Although citizenship deprivation may be against UN conventions and instruments on citizenship and statelessness, [xxix] the UK government stands firm in its decision. Likewise, Kotey also holds multiple citizenships and was thus not rendered stateless by this action.

Kotey challenges his indefinite detention without official charges brought against him. His, and similar cases, reflect the current dilemma for intelligence and national security officials on how to keep potentially dangerous individuals who served under ISIS in detention while lacking court-admissible evidence to officially charge them.[xxx] In addition, it is not illegal, nor uncommon practice, for intelligence and security officials to detain and interrogate such individuals for intelligence purposes and latter pass them down to appropriate legal channels for further processing. Thus, Kotey remains in the custody of the SDF forces without public charges having been made against him.

Despite a recent legal battle waged by his mother, the UK has also decided to share evidence with the U.S. on his alleged involvement with the cell without any legal stipulations that he would not face the death penalty in the event of his extradition to the United States.[xxxi] Given the current legal and political landscape, coupled with the fact that Kotey remains a high target in terms of threat and intelligence, it is highly likely that

he will be brought before the prison at Guantanamo Bay. That said, the prospect of him ending up in Guantanamo Bay could lead to further legal hurdles—for example, whether the U.S. government has the authority to keep him there under the authority granted by U.S. Congress to fight the perpetrators of the 9/11 attack.[xxxii] Likewise, Kotey could face an indefinite detention time in Guantanamo Bay, without facing charges.

Kotey protests his innocence, saying, "I never joined any organization. They [Western authorities] don't differentiate between a foreigner who belongs to an organization, and if you are in a region. It is legal [to have been in Syria]," he argues. Yet, the Independent's Lizzie Dearden, who interviewed Kotey and El Sheikh in 2018, reported that they both admitted to having joined ISIS, but not to being Beatles.[xxxiii] Likewise, VICE reporter Isobel Yeung[xxxiv] has stated that Kotey and El Sheikh were not repentant and stated they would travel to Syria again if they had a chance to repeat their decision. According to Yeung, they likewise held out hope in July of 2018 that if President Trump withdrew U.S. forces from Syria, that their still freed ISIS cadres might break them out of the SDF prisons in which they are currently detained.

Kotey's wife is Syrian. "I lived in Syria from 2012 to 2018 and I think Syria is a wonderful place," he states. Kotey still holds out vague hope for freedom: for being released or ending in some kind of prisoner exchange and having some future in Syria. He concludes with his dream of the future: "If I found a hospitable place, not hostile, I'd love to settle in the country."

Kotey continues to talk to journalists but reveals very little about his alleged time in ISIS and the Beatles. He hopes to walk away free one time. In the meantime, we continue to struggle to understand and develop effective prevention and intervention strategies for people like him who came to Syria, perhaps with good intentions, but who appear to have turned into monsters in the process.

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made-in-syria-alexanda-kotey-speaks/

About the authors:

Anne Speckhard, Ph.D., is Director of the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) and serves as an Adjunct Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Georgetown University School of Medicine. She has interviewed over 600 terrorists, their family members and supporters in various parts of the world including in Western Europe, the Balkans, Central Asia, the Former Soviet Union and the Middle East. In the past two years, she and ICSVE staff have been collecting interviews (n=101) with ISIS defectors, returnees and prisoners, studying their trajectories into and out of terrorism, their experiences inside ISIS, as well as developing the materials from these interviews. She has also been training key stakeholders in law enforcement, intelligence, educators, and other countering violent extremism professionals on the use of counter-narrative messaging materials produced by ICSVE both locally and internationally as well as studying the use of children as violent actors by groups such as ISIS and consulting on how to rehabilitate them. In 2007, she was responsible for designing the psychological and Islamic challenge aspects of the Detainee Rehabilitation Program in Iraq to be applied to 20,000 + detainees and 800 juveniles. She is a sought after counterterrorism expert and has consulted to NATO, OSCE, foreign governments and to the U.S. Senate & House, Departments of State, Defense, Justice, Homeland Security, Health & Human Services, CIA and FBI and CNN, BBC, NPR, Fox News, MSNBC, CTV, and in Time, The New York Times, The Washington Post, London Times and many other publications. She regularly speaks and publishes on the topics of the psychology of radicalization and terrorism and is the author of several books, including *Talking to Terrorists, Bride of ISIS, Undercover Jihadi* and *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate*. Her publications are found here: https://georgetown.academia.edu/AnneSpeckhard and on the ICSVE website http://www.icsve.org Follow @AnneSpeckhard

Ardian Shajkovci, Ph.D., is the Director of Research and a Senior Research Fellow at the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE). He has been collecting interviews

with ISIS defectors and studying their trajectories into and out of terrorism as well as training key stakeholders in law enforcement, intelligence, educators, and other countering violent extremism professionals on the use of counter-narrative messaging materials produced by ICSVE both locally and internationally. He has also been studying the use of children as violent actors by groups such as ISIS and how to rehabilitate them. He has conducted fieldwork in Western Europe, the Balkans, Central Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, mostly recently in Jordan and Iraq. He has presented at professional conferences and published on the topic of radicalization and terrorism. He holds a doctorate in Public Policy and Administration, with a focus on Homeland Security Policy, from Walden University. He obtained his M.A. degree in Public Policy and Administration from Northwestern University and a B.A. degree in International Relations and Diplomacy from Dominican University. He is also an adjunct professor teaching counterterrorism and CVE courses at Nichols College.

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This message was sent to **jmullins@bakersfieldpd.us** from **anne.speckhard@icsve.org**

Anne Speckhard
ICSVE
PO Box 163
Mclean, Virginia 22102